

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 18-05-2015		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE U.S.-Vietnamese Security Cooperation for Access to the SCS.				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) John Randal Wilkinson Paper Advisor: Professor Pat Sweeney and CAPT Fred Turner				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for Public Release					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the Naval War College faculty in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT Recent anti-access/area-denial initiatives by the Peoples Republic of China have the potential to deny the United States access to the South China Sea (SCS) in the event of a future conflict. How can the U.S. position itself now to ensure its access to the SCS is not prevented? One of the several ways the U.S. builds access and capabilities of its partner nations is through Security Cooperation ventures. USPACOM should continue to build and expand Security Cooperation with Vietnam in order to ensure access to the SCS in preparation for any future crisis. Specifically, focusing on the four traditional Security Cooperation areas of human capacity and human capital development, operational capacity and capability building, operational access and global freedom of action, and assurance and regional confidence building will ultimately give the U.S. access to Cam Ranh Bay and bolster Vietnamese military capabilities. Altogether this will ensure the U.S. and its partners have the appropriate access and capabilities to deter an A2/AD threat in the SCS.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Vietnam, Security Cooperation, A2/AD, China, USPACOM, South China Sea					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 21	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Chairman, JMO Dept
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-3556

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U.S.-Vietnamese Security Cooperation for Access to the SCS

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

16 June 2015

U.S.-Vietnamese Security Cooperation for Access to the SCS

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ABSTRACT

U.S.-Vietnamese Security Cooperation for Access to the SCS. Recent anti-access/area-denial initiatives by the Peoples Republic of China have the potential to deny the United States access to the South China Sea (SCS) in the event of a future conflict. How can the U.S. position itself now to ensure its access to the SCS is not prevented? One of the several ways the U.S. builds access and capabilities of its partner nations is through Security Cooperation ventures.

USPACOM should continue to build and expand Security Cooperation with Vietnam in order to ensure access to the SCS in preparation for any future crisis. Specifically, focusing on the four traditional Security Cooperation areas of human capacity and human capital development, operational capacity and capability building, operational access and global freedom of action, and assurance and regional confidence building will ultimately give the U.S. access to Cam Ranh Bay and bolster Vietnamese military capabilities. Altogether, this will aid the U.S. and its partners in their quest for appropriate access and capabilities to deter an A2/AD threat in the SCS.

INTRODUCTION

Recent anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) initiatives by the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) have the potential to deny the United States access to the South China Sea (SCS) in the event of a future conflict. How can the U.S. position itself now to ensure its access to the SCS is not prevented? As the geographic combatant commander (GCC) for the Indo-Asia-Pacific Theater, U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) is responsible for military presence and operations in the western Pacific. However, as history has shown, U.S. Combatant Commanders have taken on more responsibilities that now cover the complete range of diplomatic, information, military and economic (DIME) affairs within their area of responsibility (AOR).

Given USPACOM's greater responsibility in the western Pacific and specifically the SCS, USPACOM must ensure U.S. access cannot be prevented; especially in times of heightened tension or conflict. Having a robust military, with state-of-the-art equipment, may be the blunt force answer to *take back* a denied environment, however leveraging partner nation capabilities and access, especially those already in the area, is a crucial factor in ensuring access *before* the conflict ever begins. One of the several ways the U.S. builds access and capabilities of its partner nations is through Security Cooperation ventures. USPACOM should continue to develop and expand Security Cooperation with Vietnam in order to ensure access to the SCS in preparation for any future crisis. Specifically, focusing on four of the traditional ten Security Cooperation areas will ultimately give the U.S. access to Cam Ranh Bay and bolster Vietnamese military capabilities. Together they will ensure U.S. and its partners have the appropriate access and capabilities to counter an A2/AD threat in the SCS.

BACKGROUND

The U.S. does not claim any territory within the SCS as its own; however, it is in America's best interest to settle any disputes in the SCS within international norms. If China successfully prevented U.S. access to the SCS, it would significantly hamper the U.S.'s ability to project power.¹ The U.S.'s ability to quickly respond to crisis in the western Pacific is further complicated by the immense space U.S. forces are required to cover in the expansive Indo-Asia-Pacific Theater, an operational factor, which USPACOM Commander, Admiral Locklear referred to as the "Tyranny of Distance."²

China claims that the SCS falls within its territorial waters, and to support their claim, China has produced a "9 dash line" that dates back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD).³ According to the PRC, anything within the U-shaped line is historically Chinese territory (see figure 1).⁴ To exert control over what China perceives to be its sovereign territories in the SCS, the PRC is currently developing an army, navy, and air force that are equipped with weapons and sensors to deny access to foreign militaries.⁵ In addition, the PRC has more attack subs, both diesel and electric, than the U.S.⁶ Altogether, these forces pose a significant A2/AD threat to U.S. freedom of movement in the SCS.

¹ William S. Cohen, Maurice R. Greenberg, Ernest Z. Bower, and Murray Hiebert, *Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN*, CSIS: U.S.-ASEAN Strategy Commission Report. (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 2012), 24.

² Samuel J. Locklear, U.S. Navy, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, *A Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services on U.S. Pacific Command Posture*, 25 March 2014, 24. [Note: Locklear did not coin this phrase]

³ David Lague, "Analysis: China's nine-dashed line in South China Sea," *Reuters*, 25 May 2012.

⁴ Alexander L. Vuving, "Vietnam, the US, and Japan in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 26 November 2014.

⁵ Andrew S. Erickson, "Navy Intel Charts Chinese Sea Change: Office of Naval Intelligence Releases First Unclassified PLAN Report in Six Years," *China Analysis from Original Sources (blog)*, 9 April 2015.

⁶ Kris Osborn, "Admiral Says China Outnumbers U.S. in Attack Submarines," *DODBuzz.com*, 26 February 2015.



Figure 1

Another facet of China's ability to exert dominance in the SCS is their use of Coast Guard or Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE) vessels. The advantage of MLE vessels over combatants (warships) during peacetime is they pose a less "serious" threat than surface combatants do. However, the reality is MLE vessels are just as capable of applying coercive tactics at sea such as shouldering, water cannons, and ramming. In addition, long-term, unchallenged presence in the SCS helps legitimize China's claim to territorial sovereignty. To make matters worse, of the claimants to islands in the SCS, China has more Coast Guard/MLE vessels than Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines combined.⁷

⁷ Erickson, "Navy Intel Charts Chinese Sea Change."

The Obama administration announced its “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region when then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced it publically on 11 October 2011.⁸ As the 2012 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) pointed out, since the end of the Cold War, in respect to economic and security concerns, the center-of-gravity for the U.S. has “shifted from Europe through the Middle East to Asia.”⁹ With this change comes the added burden of dealing with counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, antipiracy, maritime and territorial disputes, economic access concerns, and counter-proliferation. The U.S. has been the primary supplier of security from these threats in Asia, but the PRC’s recent expansion outside its borders threatens this balance.¹⁰

In Admiral Locklear’s speech to the Senate Armed Services Committee, he reiterated a need for force posture, capabilities, and infrastructure to ensure USPACOM’s capacity to function in all aspects of military operations.¹¹ Admiral Locklear also stressed “USPACOM will continue to work closely with our partners, and allies, generating capabilities that achieve regional security.”¹² However, the majority of USPACOM’s forces are postured for response to a major event on the Korean peninsula. The abundance of U.S. forces are stationed in Northeast Asia, specifically Korea and Japan.¹³ Conversely, most of China’s saber rattling (other than the ongoing Sino-Japanese disagreement over the Senkakus) has taken place in the SCS, placing a growing importance in South and Southeast Asia.¹⁴ The shortest path between the Pacific and Indian Oceans is through the SCS. One-third of world trade, one-half of global petroleum and

⁸ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011.

⁹ Cohen, Greenberg, Bower, and Hiebert, *Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN*, 14-15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ Locklear, *USPACOM Posture*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ David J. Berteau, Michael J. Green, Gregory T. Kiley, and Nicholas F. Szechenyi, *U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment*, CSIS Report (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 2012), 5.

¹⁴ Berteau, Green, Kiley, and Szechenyi, *U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region*, 5.

gas shipping, and 80 percent of oil and gas destined for China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan pass through the SCS.¹⁵

As briefed by Admiral Locklear, “USPACOM posture is also dependent on the need to build stronger Security Cooperation capacities with our partners.”¹⁶ U.S. ties with Vietnam are improving ever since restoring relations in 1995. Vietnam has 2,000 miles of coastline along the SCS and 21 land features in the Spratlys.¹⁷ Vietnam’s geography makes it an ideal partner for the U.S. in regards to the SCS. In 2011, bilateral U.S.-Vietnam trade topped \$21.8 billion and by 2012 Vietnam’s defense spending accounted for 2.4 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).^{18,19} By 2020, 55 percent of Vietnam’s GDP will come from its maritime economy. These figures represent the awakening of Vietnam during a period referred to as *doi moi*. *Doi moi* traces back to the Vietnamese communist ruling party’s reaction to the economic collapse of the 1980s and fall of the Soviet Union. Vietnam’s leadership revamped its socialist market economy and enacted reforms in order to integrate into the global economy.²⁰ During Vietnam’s economic reform, under a U.S.-Vietnamese agreement, the U.S. had an active presence in Vietnam to recover remains of soldiers, sailors, and marines from the Vietnam War. The U.S. slowly built up Vietnam’s trust leading to the 1995 normalizations of diplomatic relations in order to further aid in Vietnam’s economic recovery. However, as LtCol Adam Chalkley pointed out, Vietnam has fostered many international relationships since the period of *doi moi* and its admittance into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which includes the

¹⁵ Vuving, “Vietnam, the US, and Japan in the South China Sea.”

¹⁶ Locklear, *USPACOM Posture*, 21.

¹⁷ Vuving, “Vietnam, the US, and Japan in the South China Sea.”

¹⁸ U.S. Embassy Hanoi, “U.S. and Vietnam Celebrate 10th Anniversary of Bilateral Trade Agreement,” *Press Release*, 9 December 2011.

¹⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Military Expenditure Database,” (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2015).

²⁰ Truong Tran Thuy and Nguyen Minh Ngoc, “Vietnam’s Security Challenges: Priorities, Implications, and Prospects for Regional Cooperation,” *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, pp. 93-112 (Chapter 8), (Tokyo, Japan: NIDS Joint Research No. 2, 2012), 102.

U.S. and China, however, we cannot assume that one relationship is more important than the other is.²¹

CHINESE (SINO)-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

Vietnam has an interesting history with China. China and Vietnam share a land border, but more importantly, both countries ruling communist parties look for support from one another, as two of the few remaining socialist regimes in Asia. However, there have been many disagreements between both countries, even in recent history. In 1974, as U.S. presence in Vietnam drew down following the Paris Peace Accords, China seized the opportunity to take the Paracel Islands from Vietnam. The PRC sent patrol vessels and air power to defeat the Vietnamese naval presence in the area and completed the hostile takeover with an amphibious landing to control all of the Paracel Islands.²² Again, in 1988, the PRC forcibly landed troops on the Vietnamese controlled island of Gac Ma Reef (present day Johnson Reef) and after a 28-minute battle took control of the island, with some undocumented reports stating that the PRC set the Vietnamese vessels on fire and massacred the 70 Vietnamese soldiers on the island.^{23,24}

Despite a checkered history of clashes between China and Vietnam, the two countries normalized relations in 1991. Throughout the 1990s, both countries' governments met regularly to try to resolve their ongoing land border and Gulf of Tonkin disputes. In 1999, both nations signed the Land Border Treaty as well as the Gulf of Tonkin maritime delimitation agreement in 2000.²⁵ Despite these agreements, Vietnam and China still find themselves at odds in regards to

²¹ LtCol Adam L. Chalkey, "An Engaged Vietnam: Developing a U.S. Pacific Command Solution" (research paper, U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, Newport, RI, 2013), 1.

²² Ngo Minh Tri and Koh Swee Lean Collin, "Lessons from the Battle of the Paracel Islands," *The Diplomat*, 23 January 2014.

²³ Global Security.org, "Spratly Skirmish – 1988."

²⁴ Ian Pham, "Another Invasion: China Takes Spratly, 1988," *Freedom for Vietnam (blog)*, 5 September 2010.

²⁵ Ramses Amer and Li Jianwei, "How to Manage China-Vietnam Territorial Disputes," *China U.S. Focus*, 18 April 2013.

territorial claims in the SCS. To further complicate matters, from May through August of 2014, the PRC deployed an oilrig 120 nautical miles from Vietnam's coast (20 nautical miles from the previously contested Paracel Islands). China sent approximately 80 vessels to escort the rig, including navy, MLE (Coast Guard), and fishing boats. Several collisions occurred between Vietnamese and PRC ships, with each country blaming the other.²⁶ While the U.S. is careful to not take sides in territorial disputes in the SCS, the oilrig incident garnered support for Vietnam from the U.S. and Japan.²⁷ The U.S. State Department publically admonished China's actions calling them "provocative... unilateral action [that] appears to be part of a broader Chinese behavior to advance its claims over disputed territory in a manner that undermines peace and stability in the region."²⁸

UNITED STATES-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

Despite the turmoil of the Vietnam War, the majority of Vietnamese hold a positive view of the U.S., mostly because a full 60 percent of Vietnam's population was born after the end of the Vietnam War. In addition, over 1.5 million ethnic Vietnamese live in America.²⁹ President Bill Clinton announced the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam on 11 July 1995, and later that same year the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi opened.³⁰ The U.S. is also Vietnam's largest export market with two-way trade reaching \$25 billion in 2013.³¹ Despite almost 20 years of building relations with the U.S., Vietnam is very cautious in balancing its ties with America in order not to upset its relations with China. However, what the U.S. needs to make

²⁶ Mark E. Manyin, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2014: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 24 June 2014), 1.

²⁷ Vuving, "Vietnam, the US, and Japan in the South China Sea."

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Vietnam/China: Chinese Oil Rig Operations Near the Paracel Islands," 7 May 2014.

²⁹ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

clear, is that engaging with America more does not mean Vietnam needs to engage with China less.³² By expanding defensive ties with Vietnam, the U.S. can ensure strategic access.

Even before the normalization of relations in 1995, the U.S. efforts to right legacy issues from the Vietnam War were the first steps in forming trust between the U.S. and Vietnam, and were the building blocks for the next 20 years of joint growth.³³ Despite what Carlyle Thayer termed as Vietnam's policy of "three no's" from the 2009 Defense White Paper: "no foreign alliances, no foreign bases, and no bilateral relations directed against a third party," the U.S. has been able to slowly chip away at Vietnam's "three no's" policy.³⁴

Past collaboration between the U.S. and Vietnam is the foundation USPACOM will use to shape future cooperation between the two nations. In 2001, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Vietnam to work on a strategy to build military-to-military ties between the two countries.³⁵ In 2003, the U.S. Navy had its first port call in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War.³⁶ 2005 saw the visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the U.S., the first time for Vietnam's head of government since the war, and the signing of an International Military Education and Training (IMET) agreement between both nations.³⁷ IMET grants funds to partner governments in order to provide training and education for military forces, impart skills to develop new capabilities and improve interoperability with U.S. and coalition forces.³⁸

Following the agreement, in 2006, then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld visited Vietnam to

³² Colonel William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern, and Walter Lohman, *U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment*, Backgrounder #2707 (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 18 July 2012), 10.

³³ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 18.

³⁴ Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam and the United States: Convergence but Not Congruence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea," *International Relations and Security Network*, 13 February 2013, 7.

³⁵ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, 4.

³⁶ Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, *U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations*, 5.

³⁷ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, 5.

³⁸ U.S. Department of State, *International Military Education and Training* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs).

announce the U.S. plan to sell limited defense articles to Vietnam under IMET.³⁹ The growing demand for security cooperation affairs in the Western Pacific led to the creation of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs in 2007 and on 20 September 2011 the new assistant secretary signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation with Vietnam.⁴⁰

The 2011 MOU spelled out five area of defense cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam: regular high-level dialogs, maritime security, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping.⁴¹ In 2013, the U.S. and Vietnam signed an additional agreement between the Coast Guards of both nations and Secretary of State John Kerry visited Ho Chi Minh City announcing the \$18 million package to bolster Vietnam's maritime security.⁴² One of the most significant precursors to ever-increased defense cooperation in U.S.-Vietnam relations was the October 2014 announcement that the U.S would lift its lethal arms sales ban to Vietnam.⁴³ In Secretary of State John Kerry's words, no two countries "have worked harder, done more, and done better to try to bring themselves together and change history and change the future."⁴⁴

FUTURE COOPERATION

Many Vietnamese leaders now believe that Vietnam's "three no's" policy is no longer beneficial and is hampering Vietnam's ability to promote its national interests.⁴⁵ In 2011, the U.S. looked at Vietnam, along with other Southeast Asian countries, for its Naval Medical

³⁹ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 5.

⁴⁰ Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, *U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations*, 7-8.

⁴¹ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, 6.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Truong-Minh Vu and Ngo Di Lan, "The Political Significance of American Lethal Weapons to Vietnam," *The Diplomat*, 7 October 2014.

⁴⁴ John Kerry, Secretary of State (Remarks to Ho Chi Minh City Business Community and Fulbright Economic Teaching Program Participants, American Center, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 14 December 2013).

⁴⁵ Vu and Lan, "The Political Significance of American Lethal Weapons to Vietnam."

Research Unit. Unfortunately, due to Vietnam's policy of no foreign bases, the unit was located in Cambodia instead of Vietnam.⁴⁶ In order to try to usher Vietnam into a new era of increased bilateral relations, President Obama and Prime Minister Sang signed a new Comprehensive Partnership, in 2013. The partnership spelled out the following areas of cooperation: political and diplomatic cooperation; trade and economic ties; science and technology cooperation; education; environment and health; war legacy issues; defense and security; promotion and protection of human rights; culture, tourism, and sports; as well as continued annual defense dialogue meetings.⁴⁷

Both Vietnam and the U.S. are concerned about maritime security in the SCS, and the 2011 MOU as well as the updated 2013 Comprehensive Partnership, should bolster U.S.-Vietnam military-to-military ties.⁴⁸ The U.S. should focus on four of the ten Security Cooperation areas in order to assure access to the SCS in case of a future conflict. These four areas are: 1) Human Capacity and Human Development, 2) Operational Capacity and Capability Building, 3) Operational Access and Global Freedom of Action, and 4) Assurance and Regional Confidence Building. These areas offer the greatest return on investment by the U.S. because USPACOM can significantly increase Vietnamese capabilities and U.S. access with minimal expenditure of financial and human capital. By focusing on these four critical areas of Security Cooperation and 20 years of trust, the U.S. can build Vietnamese capabilities while at the same time assuring U.S. access.

⁴⁶ Cohen, Greenberg, Bower, and Hiebert, *Developing an Enduring Strategy for ASEAN*, 19.

⁴⁷ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

HUMAN CAPACITY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The foundation for the first focus area of Human Capacity and Human Development was laid over the past 20 years. Junior officers in Vietnam's Army, Navy, and Defense Ministry's External Relations Department (ERD), who served as low-level assistants in the 1990s, are now senior ranking decision makers in those same organizations.⁴⁹ For example, in 2006 the Vietnamese Military Strategy Institute deputy director was a former defense attaché in Washington D.C. during the 1990s. Future investment by the U.S. in Vietnamese human development should include improved education and training with a particular focus on Vietnam's ability to cooperate in international coalitions. This training should include staff planning and communication within intra-governmental structures.⁵⁰

Limited English fluency has been a major roadblock to advancing Vietnam's ability to modernize its military through training of its people; however, the IMET program supports English training for foreign military personnel. Through IMET, currently small cadres of Vietnamese officers attend the U.S. Army and Naval War Colleges.⁵¹ The U.S. needs to expand IMET funding to Vietnam in order to graduate more Vietnamese officers through English language training so that they can follow-on to more advanced U.S. led defense and military training. In addition, the U.S. should use future IMET funds for an exchange program that brings Vietnamese officers to other U.S. institutions and allows U.S. junior officers to attend Vietnamese Defense institutes and think tanks.⁵² This exchange of personnel will help grow Vietnam's human capacity and development. Advancing Vietnam's human capacity is an important part of bolstering their overall military capabilities. Better-trained Vietnamese officers

⁴⁹ Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, *U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations*, 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

will be more capable of operating in the SCS against robust PRC A2/AD tactics. Increasing human capacity is the first axiom for strengthening Vietnam's capabilities. Having better trained military personnel will allow Vietnam to operate more advanced and more capable military equipment.

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY BUILDING

The second Security Cooperation focus area of Operational Capacity and Capability Building is a significant area the U.S. can focus on with training, exercises, and equipment. As Colonel Jordan recommended, building Vietnam's capacity to work effectively in international coalitions, training should focus on:

1. Logistics, transportation, and facilities support to international organizations and nongovernmental organizations during crisis
2. Evacuation and sheltering of displaced populations during civil and natural incidents
3. Roles and missions of peacekeeping forces
4. Roles, missions, and responsibilities of the military in international combined military efforts

in addition to peacekeeping and search-and-rescue capabilities.⁵³ The 2014 lifting of the lethal arms ban opens the door for foreign military sales (FMF). The U.S. should focus FMF sales to Vietnam in command and control (C2) equipment; command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) equipment; and maritime surveillance.⁵⁴ Focus on these three areas would not only fill a significant gap in Vietnam's current capabilities, but would build operational capacity in the SCS. Using U.S. purchased equipment would allow Vietnam to achieve a viable presence in the SCS, contributing to a joint U.S.-Vietnam presence, with full interoperability. Furthermore, Vietnamese training in the use

⁵³ Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, *U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

of this new equipment can come from increased IMET funding.⁵⁵ Merging better equipment with more capable and better-trained personnel will considerably strengthen Vietnamese military capabilities.

In addition to selling and training the Vietnamese on how to use updated military equipment, the U.S. needs to focus on exercises that allow Vietnam to operate its new capabilities in real-world scenarios. To date, U.S.-Vietnam Naval Engagement Activity has not moved beyond noncombat activities; however, as a CSIS study concludes, increased cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam would benefit regional security and strategic interests.⁵⁶ LtCol Chalkley believes USPACOM's first focus should be Vietnamese training on maritime security operations (MSO), search and rescue (SAR), and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) because they offer the most interoperability, leverage existing strengths and capitalize on USPACOM's vast maritime forces and Vietnam's priority on defense modernization.⁵⁷ He also recommends a push for Vietnam's Navy to participate in *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* and *Cobra Gold* exercises.⁵⁸ Should Vietnam participate, these large multinational exercises would significantly bolster their confidence in operating in a complex international environment and increase their operational capacity.

If IMET is not enough to fund these exercises, the U.S. should increase appropriations to the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF). GSCF pools DoD and DoS funds to provide training, equipment, and supplies to foreign security forces.⁵⁹ However, this program is set to end in 2015, if not reappropriated, Admiral Locklear even expressed his desire to see its authority

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 17.

⁵⁷ Chalkey, "An Engaged Vietnam: Developing a U.S. Pacific Command Solution," 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State, *The Global Security Contingency Fund* (Washington, DC: Office of Security Assistance).

continued in his 2014 speech to the Senate Armed Services Committee.⁶⁰ Better training for Vietnamese personnel, better equipment, and real-world exercises are the three mainstays USPACOM can deliver to increase Vietnam's military capabilities to counter A2/AD tactics in the SCS.

The U.S. and Vietnam have shared strategic viewpoints, specifically in the SCS. However, past Vietnamese leadership was cautious and looked for trade and economic cooperation before defense.⁶¹ In addition, sticking to their "three no's" policy, Vietnam has rejected meetings at the service level, especially navy to navy.⁶² If Vietnam sticks to its "three no's" policy, it will be very difficult for the U.S. to plant a foothold on Vietnamese territory.

The already agreed upon Coast Guard to Coast Guard cooperation, as well as Vietnam's eagerness to purchase U.S. arms that increase its self-defense capabilities, can be a starting point for the U.S. to convince Vietnam that their "three no's" policy is no longer in Vietnam's best interest. The U.S. must capitalize on both of these endeavors to further its integration with Vietnam. Through trust, Vietnam has already shown a willingness to let down its guard and allow more U.S. presence. Increased U.S. Navy port calls in Cam Ranh Bay and student exchanges at the War Colleges are a prime example of that trust. Future training and peacekeeping centers in Hanoi and Haiphong are examples that will continue to build U.S.-Vietnamese trust well into the 21st century. All these examples are a clear indicator that Vietnam can no longer stick to its "three no's" policy when it comes to a strategic U.S.-Vietnam partnership.

⁶⁰ Locklear, *USPACOM Posture*, 21.

⁶¹ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 12.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

OPERATIONAL ACCESS AND GLOBAL FREEDOM OF ACTION

Earlier discussion pointed out Vietnam's significant value because of its 2,000 nautical mile coastline on the SCS. Cam Ranh Bay is a deep-water port in Vietnam along the SCS and former site of a U.S. military base during the Vietnam War. In his 2012 trip to Vietnam, then-Secretary of Defense Panetta commented on how the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral defense relationship relied on Cam Ranh Bay as "a key component."⁶³ At first, Vietnam only allowed non-combatant U.S. Navy ships into Cam Ranh Bay, but as trust was built between the two nations and following the 2011 MOU, Vietnam acquiesced to U.S. Navy warships visiting Cam Ranh Bay, but no more than once a year.

In order for the U.S. to assure operational access to the SCS, Cam Ranh Bay is a decisive point, its use is crucial to U.S. operations in the SCS. The U.S. must convince Vietnam that more frequent visits from U.S. Navy warships to Cam Ranh Bay is beneficial to the strategic goals of both nations. Agreeing to visits that are more frequent would allow USPACOM to increase its presence in the SCS. In addition, Vietnam could allow the U.S. to place logistical equipment and supplies for its ships at Cam Ranh Bay in return for shared use and training on their use during maritime maneuvers. Having USPACOM forces deployed to Cam Ranh Bay before any conflict is an important lynchpin for the U.S. to secure access to the SCS in the event of a PRC A2/AD scenario.

ASSURANCE AND REGIONAL CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Maritime security in the SCS is a concern for the U.S. and Vietnam. Vietnam has already signed on for advanced training of their Coast Guard with U.S. Coast Guard personnel. Vietnam's Coast Guard now falls under the Ministry of Defense making it an essential

⁶³ Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, *U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations*, 1.

component of maritime security in the SCS region.⁶⁴ In addition, Vietnam wants increased commitment from the U.S. in joint maritime patrols in the SCS, knowing that they cannot match ship for ship the PRC's presence, but the U.S. can help weigh the scale in Vietnam's favor.⁶⁵ The U.S.'s pledge to sell five new patrol vessels to Vietnam in the next few years should go a long ways in assuring U.S. regional commitment to Vietnam.⁶⁶ The new patrol vessels will be a significant capability increase for Vietnam. With this new capability, the U.S. will be able to hand off more SCS security initiatives to Vietnam as their equipment capabilities increase, easing the burden on U.S. forces.

In 2016, Vietnam is due to begin construction of a peacekeeping center near Hanoi and a training facility near Haiphong, both with U.S. support.⁶⁷ These two centers will transcend all four of the above focus areas of Security Cooperation. Vietnamese officers will expand their English proficiency and gain knowledge in U.S. tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) that they can bring back to their home bases, building up their human and operational capacities. In addition, U.S. presence at these centers will plant a foothold leading to greater U.S. operational access as well as assure regional confidence with its peacekeeping endeavors. An idea by Max Boot, another opportunity USPACOM could employ that would affect all four of the discussed Security Cooperation focus areas would be a creation of a "coalition village" at USPACOM headquarters in Hawaii, very similar to the "coalition village" at USCENTCOM.⁶⁸ This community would allow not only Vietnamese officers to work with U.S. personnel at Camp Smith, but any SCS regional actor to set up a liaison component at USPACOM. Close

⁶⁴ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 13.

⁶⁵ Vu and Lan, "The Political Significance of American Lethal Weapons to Vietnam."

⁶⁶ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 13-15.

⁶⁸ Max Boot, "Topic: Southeast Asia Treaty Organization: Building an East Asian NATO," *Commentary Magazine*, 11 May 2010.

cooperation from the “coalition village” would help assure regional confidence, as well as shape human and operational capacity of member nations.

A sticking point for particular groups within the U.S. is reluctance in helping Vietnam too much because of their past human rights record, this is especially true of certain members of the U.S. Congress who play a significant role in thwarting the executive branches efforts to increase U.S.-Vietnam relations.⁶⁹ Over a million Vietnamese Americans who oppose the Communist regime in Vietnam and believe the U.S. should not collaborate with the current government further exacerbate this view.⁷⁰ However, in regards to human rights, Vietnam has made significant strides over the past 25 years. Freedom of expression has fostered with Vietnam’s economic growth. In fact, in 2014, Amnesty International visited Vietnam and promised to return, while Vietnam’s leadership was willing to engage in several human rights proposals.⁷¹ If Vietnam continues its current, upward trajectory in righting wrongs from past human rights violations, within a few years, U.S. lawmakers should have little reason left to condemn Vietnamese government actions when it comes to human rights.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. through USPACOM must continue to strengthen Security Cooperation ties with Vietnam in order to assure the appropriate access and capabilities are available should conflict arise in the Western Pacific. By focusing on Vietnam’s human capacity and human capital development, operational capacity and capability building, operational access and global freedom of action, and assurance and regional confidence building now and in the future the U.S. can counter any possible A2/AD initiatives by an aggressor in the SCS. However, we must

⁶⁹ Hiebert, Nguyen, and Poling, *A New Era in U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9-10.

acknowledge that both the U.S. and Vietnam are walking a tightrope in regards to provoking China into action. The 800-pound “panda” in the room is China, with their aggressive sovereign territorial claims in the SCS. Vietnam is looking at a partnership with the U.S. to offset its limited capabilities as the PRC claims territories closer and closer to Vietnam. At the same time, the U.S. wants stability in the region.

The U.S. and Vietnam can both achieve their strategic goals as well as avoid provocation of the PRC by adhering to a reasonable partnership that uses four key focus areas under the Security Cooperation umbrella. The U.S. can help bolster Vietnamese training, equipment and exercises that will in turn increase Vietnamese Coast Guard and military capabilities in the SCS while at the same time increase U.S. access. The U.S. must try to accomplish its global goals with limited funding. Sequestration, the drawdown of forces after two decade-long wars, and other economic uncertainties means the U.S. will need to leverage its partner nations even more in the future as funds continue to become scarcer. By strengthening Security Cooperation with Vietnam, the U.S. will have a partner nation in the SCS that can provide both access and its own interoperable capabilities to ensure the U.S. can counter any future Chinese A2/AD strategies in the SCS.

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